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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine what is happening in the day-to-day operation of learning and reading disability programs in various school systems and to survey reading personnel's feelings about existing practices and organizational structures. A questionnaire, designed to discover procedures for helping children with reading or learning disability problems, was sent to reading directors or supervisors in 37 selected school districts representing all city sizes and regions of the state of Connecticut. The respondents were asked two questions: Within your school system, have the roles of the reading person and the learning-disabilities person been defined in written job descriptions? Is there a formal outline or master plan concerning the relationship of the tasks and duties of the reading person and the learning-disability person? Findings showed that job descriptions for both reading and learning-disability personnel are not the norm in districts surveyed and that 68% reported no formal outline or master plan concerning the relationship of the tasks and duties of the reading and learning-disability personnel. A brief summary of implications is presented. (MB)

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Learning Disabilities
and
Reading Personnel in Connecticut Schools:
System-level Coordination

by

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A child is having difficulty remembering new sight words; his teacher believes he needs special help. Who in the school system will service this child? The reading specialist? The learning disabilities specialist? This question is being raised by reading people, learning disabilities people, administrators, and classroom teachers across the nation. In the case of the child with difficulty in learning sight vocabulary, one might say that sight vocabulary is part of reading and, therefore, is the responsibility of the reading teacher. On the other hand, one could suggest that the child has a visual memory deficit and needs the assistance of the learning disabilities teacher. Each of these solutions is, of course, an oversimplification. A good diagnostician would obviously want more information about the child and his reading skills. Who then does the further diagnosis? What instruments are to be used? Does the specialist who does the diagnosis construct the instructional prescription? Will the reading and the learning disabilities specialists use different instruments and arrive at the same conclusions? Is there any difference in instructional prescriptions and procedures used by reading and learning disabilities specialists? The answers to these questions affect the daily services provided for students and, therefore, deserve serious consideration and investigation.

The concerns about the roles of the reading and learning disabilities personnel is not restricted to the operational problems of individual school systems. At the state and national levels today experts in both fields are meeting, discussing, formulating position papers and establishing definitions in an attempt to outline the roles of the two professional groups. The Summer, 1975, issue of The Journal of Special Education and the October, 1976, issue of The Journal of Learning Disabilities featured collections of papers focusing on the relationship between reading and learning disabilities specialists. The December, 1976, issue of The Reading Teacher contained a listing of each state's requirements for preservice reading training for learning disability certification. The International Reading Association in its annual business session of 1976 considered and approved a resolution expressing concern about the role of learning disabilities teachers in servicing children with reading problems. The Connecticut Reading Research Association has been active in investigating the state guidelines for learning disabilities and reading.

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These national and state committees, national publications and professional organizations certainly play a significant role in defining, proposing and in some cases, regulating educational practice. However, the definitions and procedures that emerge from these sources are often "after-the-fact." Because of the pressures of day-to-day happenings, because of immediate needs of children and because of the need for immediate action, public school personnel often must create or adopt definitions of "learning disability" and "reading problem," establish diagnostic processes and assign children to either or both specialists without the decisions or recommendations of the state and national committees. Definitions, procedures, and prescriptions often evolve, solidify and become "the way" things are done without any formal discussions, statements or decisions actually being made.

Purpose of Study

These informally-evolved policies may work very well; the students may be receiving excellent, appropriate services; state and national guidelines may be superfluous. The purpose of this study was to determine what is happening in the day-to-day operation in various school systems and to survey reading personnel's feelings about existing practices and organizational structures.

Procedures

In order to determine the status of these organizational structures, a questionnaire was designed to tap existing formal and informal procedures for servicing children with reading and/or learning disability problems. The questionnaire, mailed in October, 1976, consisted of one sheet which all respondents completed; on this sheet the respondent was asked to complete informational data (title of position held by the person completing the questionnaire and the size of the town) and two items. The two items were:

1. Within your school system have the roles of the reading person and the learning disabilities person been defined in written job descriptions?
2. Within your system is there a formal outline or master plan concerning the relationship of the tasks and duties of the reading and learning disability people? For example, has it been delineated who diagnoses which child, who uses which assessment instruments and who provides what instruction?

Depending upon the answer to item 2, a respondent then completed one other page. Each of the other pages required descriptions of the process being used in the individual district and the satisfaction with the particular process. Each respondent answered two standard questions:

1. What criteria does your system use for classifying a child as having "learning disability problems"?
2. What criteria does your system use for classifying a child as having "reading problems"?

The questionnaire was sent to reading directors or supervisors in 37 selected school districts representing all city sizes and regions of the State of Connecticut. Twenty-five questionnaires, approximately 70%, were returned with complete, usable information. The size of the cities reported on the returned questionnaires were as follows:

cities of 100,000 or more	3
50,000 to 99,999	4
30,000 to 49,999	6
10,000 to 29,900	4
under 10,000	8

The reading director was selected as the person within the system most directly responsible for the reading services and the person most likely to have knowledge about the current, official administrative policies and procedures relating to the job responsibilities of the reading and learning disabilities personnel.

Findings of the Study

Responses to the questionnaire items were categorized by individual questions and by size of city. Interestingly, the size of the city did not appear to be a determining factor for any item.

Job descriptions - reading and learning disabilities personnel. The existence of written job descriptions for both positions is not the norm in the districts surveyed. Twenty-four percent (6 out of 25 systems) reported both positions have written job descriptions. Twenty-four percent (6 out of 25 systems) reported no written descriptions for either position. Twenty-eight percent (7 out of 25) reported written descriptions for reading only while one district (4%) reported a job description for learning disabilities only. Twenty percent (5 out of 25) reported that job descriptions were in the process of being written. The size of the town did not appear to influence whether written descriptions existed. Although more districts (52%) have job descriptions for reading personnel than for learning disability personnel (28%), it is surprising in light of accountability measures in public schools that the majority of districts have not formulated written job descriptions for both these positions.

Presence of a Master Plan. The majority of the districts - 17 out of 25, or 68% - reported no "formal outline or master plan concerning the relationship of the tasks and duties of the reading and learning disability people." Five districts or 20% of the responding districts reported that a formal outline or master plan existed and 3 districts (12%) reported that they were in the process of formulating a master plan. Again, the size of the district was not a significant factor.

Reports of a master plan in existence. The five districts reporting a formal master plan in existence generally described this plan as a procedure

where referrals from various sources are made to individual specialists (reading, learning disabilities, psychology) and testing by this specialist then occurs. Referrals to other specialists are possible and occur when other problems or questions arise. The state guidelines for placement and special instruction heavily influenced the various districts' procedures. Two districts reported that the state guidelines were the procedures they followed.

One district described a plan that is in its first year of operation and was considerably more structured and sequenced than other reported plans. Under this plan all referrals are considered before any testing by a planning and placement team consisting of the classroom teacher, principal, learning disabilities teacher, speech teacher, reading consultant, psychologist, social worker and nurse. The team discusses the problem, the past information, and formulates a plan of action. Referrals for testing and other types of data gathering are included in the plan of action, and the information is presented at the next team meeting. On the basis of the information, the team designs educational plans for the student, designates who gives instruction, support services and possible further testing. Although the final stages of this plan is a typical pupil planning team function, the initial meeting to plan the collection of information and testing of the child was unique among the districts surveyed and provided a structured base for communication among the various specialists.

Of the five districts reporting a formal plan, three districts indicated a need for better coordination and communication among the specialists, one district was satisfied with its plan and one district is in the first year of operation.

Reports of informal plans. Interestingly, what some districts described as "their formal procedures" many districts have evolved on "an informal basis." The 17 districts who reported no master plan responded to the question, "If you have no formal plan, what do you see as the informal procedures that may have been established?" Typically, those responding to this item described informal procedures that fit into three categories:

- 1) informal communication channels between reading consultants and learning disabilities specialists provide basis for decisions - six districts.
- 2) pupil placement team procedure - three districts.
- 3) complete separation or minimal communication between reading and special education and/or learning disabilities departments - 8 districts.

Eight districts, 32% of the total number of districts reporting report no or minimal communication between reading and learning disabilities departments, a surprisingly large number.

In statements describing a cooperative arrangement between reading and learning disability specialists, terms such as "perceptual problems," "behavior problems," and "modality deficits" reoccurred. If learning disability is defined in these terms, it appeared easier to draw a distinction between the areas of reading and learning disabilities.

Only four out of 17 districts reporting no formal master plan felt that their procedures for identifying and planning instructional programs were effective and avoided duplication of effort.

Reports of master plans in process of being prepared. If a district reported that it was in the process of formulating a master plan, typically the district described a series of meetings between the reading director and the special services director to determine responsibilities of each area specialist. The problems that arose were those of definition; the definition of a "learning disability" when brought to the operational, behavioral level consistently overlapped that of a "reading problem." As the child enters the seventh and eighth grades, the operational definitions of reading and learning disability problems become almost synonymous.

Criteria used for classifying a child. In response to the questions regarding criteria for classifying a child as having a learning disability or reading problem, three different types of responses occurred across all districts reporting. First, "no set criteria" for either classification were reported. Second, in describing learning disabilities either the standard "exclusion" definition of learning disabilities was cited or the procedure (teacher observations, ITPA, WISC, Slingerland, P.P.T. decision, and/or parental pressures) was described. Third, in describing the criteria for classifying a child as having a reading problem many districts reported using the standard of one or two years below grade level (or in some districts below potential) level. There was not unanimous or near unanimous agreement on the criteria used to decide if a child has a reading problem.

Summary

These results suggest there is still much to be done in establishing workable procedures for servicing students who need the assistance of reading and learning disability personnel. The pupil planning team as specified by state law does provide a general framework for some kinds of decision making. Before a student's case comes before the planning and placement team, however, many important decisions have already been made. Who diagnoses and who decides to bring the case to the team may seriously influence whether the child is labelled learning disabled and thus what extra services he may receive. The types of tests used may determine his/her classification and subsequent prescription. It seems that the master plan should include an outline of procedures of what occurs from the point of the initial referral to the final stage of follow-up monitoring of a student's progress in his/her regular class setting.

Designing such a master plan presents several problems. If the ultimate goal of the plan is to insure that the child receives the best possible service, then the logical starting point might be the listing in objective terms of the specific skills each specialist possesses and subsequently matching this knowledge and skills with each child's needs. Such an approach, however, de-emphasizes labels such as learning disability or remedial reader and is not necessarily easily compatible with state regulations for identification and placement of students with special needs.

Another approach to establishing a master plan might be through the use of definitions. If this approach is used, the data from this survey suggests that definitions in both learning disabilities and reading need to be carefully analyzed and behavioral characteristics identified. The new formula measuring "severe discrepancy" published by the federal government, does not encourage any behavioral specifications. The formula, therefore, will not answer any of the day-to-day questions of what measures should be used in determining spelling deficiency, what prescription should be written and who can best service the child. The basic question will still remain: If a child has a reading problem, who is best qualified to help the child overcome the problem and succeed in his academic career?

Perhaps each system needs to formulate its own set of working papers and its own set of guidelines describing who gives which assessment instruments, who assesses which children, who is responsible for what instruction and who evaluates the success or failure of a particular instructional plan. The state and national committees and departments can establish broad definitions, establish procedures on who must attend meetings, who must sign the required documents, and when instruction and evaluation must be implemented. The crucial questions of who provides what services--the questions of what happens to and for the child on a day-to-day basis--must be answered by the individual school system.